



May 3, 2021

*Via Electronic Communication*

Austin City Council  
301 W 2<sup>nd</sup> Street,  
Austin, TX 78701

RE: Dougherty Arts Center Relocation

Dear Mayor and Council Members,

The Save Our Springs Alliance (SOS) agrees with the Environmental Commission and the Parks and Recreation Board that **Option 1B is not an acceptable use of the parkland** along Austin's lakefront. This Thursday, we ask that you postpone making a final decision on the preferred design of the Dougherty Arts Center (DAC) to provide time for the consideration of alternatives that will limit the amount of parkland consumed by the recommended proposal.

If a postponement cannot be secured for further consideration of options, we ask that you vote for Option 1A and against Option 1B, consistent with the unanimous Parks Board recommendation and the recommendation of the Environmental Board.

As much as Austin likes to market itself as a green oasis, we have a serious parkland deficiency. We simply do not have enough parkland to serve our expanding population. In the latest Trust for Public Land's *ParkScore* index, the City of Austin ranked 37<sup>th</sup> amongst the largest American cities in meeting the parkland needs for its residents. Although the City spends a significant amount of money per resident, Austin ranks very low compared to peer cities on the total amount of parkland and access to parkland for our residents. With this perspective in mind, it is baffling to us that the City is—yet again—considering converting several acres of prime parkland along Lady Bird Lake into buildings and driveways for an arts center, along with a parking garage to accommodate more single-occupancy automobiles.

The proposed Option 1B conflicts directly with council direction from May 2019. It is a different location entirely than what council tentatively approved; that location is shown clearly in two maps before the council at that meeting that depict the proposed location clustered next to the Zach Scott Theatre. Council direction also called for a comprehensive traffic study and transportation demand reduction plan, with a specific direction to "**underpark**" the proposed facility in light of very difficult car access to the Butler Shores location. Staff has not prepared such a study and is now proposing a parking garage that would expand (not reduce) parking from 85 spaces at the existing DAC to over 200 spaces in the proposed new garage.

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While we support the mission of DAC and are excited to see plans move forward to relocate it out of a floodplain, we question whether that relocation must occur at the expense of the City's limited parkland. Both the Environmental Commission and Parks and Recreation Board expressed concerns that Option 1B consumed too much parkland. The sprawled-out building layout within Option 1B would pave over scarce parkland to make way for parking and convert a relatively natural area of the shoreline into an urbanized building-oriented view from the lake, the park, and the hike and bike trail.

The protection and creation of greenspace must be a priority in whatever plans are adopted, but **Option 1B consumes far more of functional parkland as does Option 1A**. The diagrams included in your backup material are misleading. They appear to equate the rooftop of a parking lot to protected greenspace along the lakefront. The rooftop of a parking garage is not protected parkland. Both commissions preferred a more compact design, clustering the buildings away from the lakefront and minimizing the amount of greenspace taken up by the new facility.

We agree with this perspective, but we would take the analysis one step further—instead of continuing with plans to locate DAC on Butler Park, the City should be working on alternatives that would avoid impacts to the parkland altogether. As Council Member Pio Renteria wisely pointed out when this issue first came before council, the City could be pursuing a partnership with the Austin Independent School District (AISD) to locate the DAC in one of its recently closed schools—which would both support the school district financially and expand the DAC's outreach for its educational programming to more segments of our community. Although not reflected in the City Council final vote from May 2019, there was a clear preference from the entire council that other sites, especially AISD sites, continue to be considered.

**SOS encourages the City Council to adopt a policy to stop putting new or expanded parking lots within parks**. With the overwhelming approval of 2018 Prop. A, it is evident Austin voters want to see investments in transit alternatives and less reliance on cars. Paving parking lots on parkland sends the wrong message. Austin does not have a parking problem; we have a mobility problem. Building 200 new parking spaces will not improve mobility.

Should the Council be set on new parking being needed for the area, there are other properties in the immediate vicinity of this location that may be better suited for a parking garage and could handle the anticipated traffic flow better, such as the sign shop currently operated by the Austin Transportation Department. We encourage the Council to fully vet these options before voting to proceed with any of the current design options.

Feel free to give me a call should you have any questions concerning the above.

Many thanks,

**Bobby Levinski**  
Attorney,  
Save Our Springs Alliance  
512-636-7649 (mobile)  
bobby@sosalliance.org